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TAGS: PGOV PINR PREL CU

SUBJECT: CONVERSATION WITH DAGOBERTO VALDES

Classified By: COM: Michael E. Parmly: For reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: At a September 5 dinner at the COM Residence, Dagoberto Valdes, former editor-in-chief of Vitral, Pinar del Rio's Catholic review, reflected on life after his resignation from Vitral, the institution of the Church, and his future role as someone who does not want to compete against the new Vitral. Valdes appreciated Post's offer to provide him with USINT-generated daily press clippings, stressing that information was the key to change in Cuba. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Though seemingly not embittered, a philosophical and reflective Valdes explained that he is inspired by a one-word message the COM sent him upon his resignation from Vitral, earlier this year. "Coraje, (courage)" Valdes said, was the same word that came from the lips of Pope John Paul II during their last meeting that occurred a few months prior to the Pope's death. Valdes said that he is moving on. He meets once a week with 11 of his 77 former staff, who are people he can count on. He said he is not quite ready yet to put out any publication. Whenever he is ready, whatever form his writings will take, Valdes indicated he will not compete with the new Vitral. He said that he could not "soil the nest" that was his home.

¶3. (C) His stated respect for the new Vitral notwithstanding, Valdes is bitter about the top echelons of the Church in Cuba. The ascension of Serpa as the new bishop of Pinar del Rio, which set in motion the chain of events which led to his resignation, was virtually the work of Cardinal Ortega, with the blessing of the Vatican coordinator of the Latin American bishops. In his estimation, Bishop Serpa, therefore, is as much of a regime figure as Cardinal Ortega, and not to be trusted. Valdes makes a sharp distinction between these top tiers of the Church and the priests and grassroots laity. To Valdes, they constitute a powerful force, but lacking in leadership, or without support from above, they will not be as effective.

¶4. (C) Uncertain of how best to channel his dissenting message in the future, at present Valdes is concentrating on the rolling-out of a book which compiles many of his editorials in Vitral. The book was presented last week in Spain, and will be presented in Miami on September 21. COM advised Valdes to focus more on the Belgian, French and Italian press.

¶5. (C) Comment: After 17 years at the helm of one of the most respected publications of the Catholic Church in Cuba, and his safehaven from which he projected a voice of dissent, Valdes is still treading water and uncertain of what course

to take. We made our resources available to him, and he took us up on our offer to send him our daily news clippings, in the hope that when he is ready, Valdes will use his mighty pen again.

PARMLY